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SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV, PREL, PHUM, PINS, PINR, PREF, CU  
SUBJECT: INFORMAL POLL OF REFUGEE APPLICANTS SHOWS WOEFUL  
LACK OF INFORMATION

Classified By: CDA James L Williams for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (C) SUMMARY: FROM MAY 20 TO JUNE 20, USINT REFUGEE UNIT CONDUCTED AN UNOFFICIAL AND UNSCIENTIFIC SURVEY OF 236 CUBAN ADULTS (OVER AGE 21) WHO WERE PRINCIPAL APPLICANTS FOR REFUGEE STATUS. RESULTS REVEALED THAT OVER HALF OF THOSE SURVEYED COULD NOT IDENTIFY ANY OF SEVEN PROMINENT CUBAN DISSIDENTS/OPPOSITION FIGURES, AND THAT EVEN PERSONALITIES TOUTED IN GOC PROPAGANDA ARE NOT WELL KNOWN. THE LACK OF NAME RECOGNITION IS EMBLEMATIC OF A SOCIETY THAT HAS BEEN ALTERNATIVELY STARVED AND FORCE-FED INFORMATION FOR YEARS. WE REPORT THIS INFORMATION FORWHAT IT IS WORTH AS ONE INDICATOR OF THE EXTENT TO WHICH CUBANS REMAIN UNINFORMED ABOUT THE WORLD AROUND THEM. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) RESPONDENTS WERE TOLD THE SURVEY WAS ANONYMOUS AND HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH THEIR REFUGEE APPLICATION. THEY FILLED OUT THE SURVEY IN THE PRIVACY OF AN INTERVIEW ROOM. THE SURVEY WAS CONDUCTED ONLY AMONG REFUGEE APPLICANTS, AND THUS WAS NOT A REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE OF THE CUBAN POPULATION. RATHER, THOSE WHO APPLY TO THE REFUGEE PROGRAM BELIEVE (AND USUALLY CAN DOCUMENT) THAT THEY HAVE BEEN VICTIMS OF HARASSMENT, REPRESSION, AND PERSECUTION AT THE HANDS OF THE CUBAN GOVERNMENT. VIRTUALLY ALL CLAIM THAT THEY OPPOSE THE GOVERNMENT AND THE PRESSURE IS SO GREAT THAT THEY MUST LEAVE CUBA. ONE MIGHT ASSUME, THEREFORE, THAT REFUGEE APPLICANTS ARE MORE LIKELY THAN THE AVERAGE CUBAN TO BE AWARE OF AND

RECEPTIVE TO THE MESSAGE OF CUBAN DISSIDENTS/OPPOSITION FIGURES FOR CHANGE. TO TEST THE AWARENESS OF THE DISSIDENT MOVEMENT IN CUBA, HAVANA REFUGEE COORDINATOR DEVISED A NAME RECOGNITION SURVEY, CONTAINING A LIST OF 20 INDIVIDUALS (WITH SEVEN DISSIDENTS MIXED IN) AND ASKING THE RESPONDENT TO STATE WHO EACH PERSON IS. BELOW IS THE LIST OF NAMES ON THE SURVEY, THE NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS WHO CORRECTLY IDENTIFIED THE NAME, AND THE PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO ANSWERED CORRECTLY.

A. OSCAR ESPINOSA CHEPE (INDEPENDENT ECONOMIST AND DISSIDENT, ONE OF THE 75 DISSIDENTS ARRESTED, TRIED AND CONVICTED IN 2003 TO 20 YEARS IN PRISON. SERVED 19 MONTHS BEFORE BEING RELEASED FOR HEALTH REASONS. FOR OVER FIVE YEARS, HOSTED A WEEKLY RADIO SEGMENT ON RADIO MARTI). NUMBER WHO ANSWERED CORRECTLY: 42/236, OR 18 PERCENT.

B. MARIO CESAR KINDELAN MESA (TWO-TIME OLYMPIC GOLD MEDAL WINNING BOXER (SYDNEY 2000 AND ATHENS 2004). BOXING IS A VERY POPULAR AND IMPORTANT SPORT IN CUBA.): NUMBER WHO ANSWERED CORRECTLY: 62/236, OR 26 PERCENT.

C. MARTHA BEATRIZ ROQUE: (ONE OF CUBA'S MOST PROMINENT, VOCAL, AND RECOGNIZABLE DISSIDENTS, IMPRISONED 1997-2000 FOR HER PAPER TITLED "THE HOMELAND BELONGS TO ALL" CALLING FOR POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC REFORMS. ALSO IMPRISONED IN 2003 AS ONE OF THE 75 DISSIDENTS, FOR DEMOCRACY RELATED ACTIVITIES. RELEASED IN 2004 FOR DECLINING HEALTH. MBR WAS FRONT PAGE NEWS IN GRANMA, CUBA'S OFFICIAL NEWSPAPER, AND ON TELEVISION ON MAY 20/21, 2008 WHEN THIS SURVEY COMMENCED, FOR SUPPOSEDLY RECEIVING MONEY FROM CUBAN "TERRORISTS" IN THE UNITED STATES.): NUMBER WHO ANSWERED CORRECTLY: 102/236, OR 43 PERCENT.

D. RICARDO ALARCON (PRESIDENT OF CUBA'S NATIONAL ASSEMBLY SINCE 1993): 176/236, OR 75 PERCENT. NOTE: FEW RESPONDENTS SEEMED TO KNOW ALARCON'S TITLE. MANY RESPONDENTS SAID HE WAS A "GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL," OR "POLITICIAN," OR "VICE PRESIDENT."

E. JOSE RAUL CAPABLANCA (WORLD CHESS CHAMPION 1921-27.): 151/236, OR 64 PERCENT.

F. ROBERTO DE MIRANDA (ANOTHER MEMBER OF THE "75", SENTENCED TO A 20 YEAR TERM IN 2003 FOR COLLECTING SIGNATURES FOR THE VARELA PROJECT, WHICH WORKS FOR DEMOCRATIC REFORMS AND THE RELEASE OF POLITICAL PRISONERS IN CUBA. PRESIDENT OF THE ASSOCIATION OF INDEPENDENT TEACHERS, WHICH SEEKS TO KEEP POLITICAL IDEOLOGY OUT OF SCHOOLS. FOUNDER OF THE FIRST INDEPENDENT LIBRARY IN CUBA): 12/236, OR FIVE PERCENT.

G. ALICIA ALONSO: (MOST RECOGNIZABLE FIGURE IN CUBAN BALLET. BALLET IS HUGE IN CUBA.): 218/236, OR 92 PERCENT.

H. JOSE LUIS PEREZ GARCIA AKA ANTUNEZ: (ONE OF THE MOST PROMINENT DISSIDENTS IN CUBA, JAILED FOR 17 YEARS, RELEASED 2007. ANTUNEZ IS EXTREMELY COURAGEOUS, HAVING STAGED MULTIPLE HUNGER STRIKES MAKING DEMANDS FOR HIS FELLOW

POLITICAL PRISONERS, AND ALWAYS CHALLENGING THE REGIME. ANTUNEZ CURRENTLY FACES NEW CHARGES THAT COULD LAND HIM ANOTHER JAIL TERM. ALONG WITH MBR, DENOUNCED IN CUBAN MEDIA MAY 20/21, 2008 FOR ALLEGEDLY RECEIVING MONEY FROM CUBAN "TERRORISTS" IN THE UNITED STATES.): 51/236, OR 22 PERCENT.

I. CARLOS LAGE DAVILA: (VICE PRESIDENT): 180/236, OR 76 PERCENT. LIKE ALARCON, MANY RESPONDENTS IDENTIFIED LAGE AS "POLITICIAN," OR "GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL," WITHOUT SPECIFICALLY MENTIONING HIS ACTUAL TITLE.

J. LAURA POLLAN: (WIFE OF IMPRISONED CUBAN ACTIVIST HECTOR MASEDA, LEADER OF THE DAMAS DE BLANCO - LADIES IN WHITE, ORGANIZATION OF SPOUSES OF GROUP OF 75. VERY PROMINENT CUBAN OPPOSITION FIGURE WHO REGULARLY LEADS ANTI-GOC MARCHES IN THE STREETS OF HAVANA, DEMANDING RELEASE OF POLITICAL PRISONERS): 38/236, OR 16 PERCENT.

K. REINALDO ARENAS (1943-1990. CUBAN POET, NOVELIST, AND PLAYWRIGHT FAMOUS FOR SUCH WORKS AS "BEFORE NIGHT FALLS" (ON NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER LIST 1993 AND MADE INTO A FILM STARRING JAVIER BARDEM IN 2000). AFTER SERVING TIME IN PRISON FOR COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARY VIEWS, FLED CUBA IN 1980 MARIEL BOATLIFT. NOVELS BANNED IN CUBA. 9/236 OR 4 PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS RECOGNIZED ARENAS.

L. LIVAN HERNANDEZ AND ORLANDO HERNANDEZ: (CUBAN BROTHERS AND PITCHERS WHO BOTH FLED TO PLAY PROFESSIONAL BASEBALL IN THE UNITED STATES IN 1995 AND 1997 RESPECTIVELY. BASEBALL IS THE NUMBER ONE SPORT IN CUBA AND WIDELY PLAYED AND WATCHED): 44/236, OR 19 PERCENT.

M. ALBITA RODRIGUEZ: (CUBAN SINGER, LIVING IN MIAMI SINCE 1988): 127/236, OR 54 PERCENT.

N. OSCAR ELIAS BISCET: (CUBAN DOCTOR AND PROMINENT CHRISTIAN ANTI-ABORTION ACTIVIST, AND A NOTED ADVOCATE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRATIC FREEDOMS IN CUBA. ONE OF THE GROUP OF 75, DR. BISCET IS SERVING A 25-YEAR PRISON SENTENCE. IN RECOGNITION OF HIS ADVOCACY EFFORTS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY, PRESIDENT BUSH BESTOWED UPON BISCET THE PRESIDENTIAL MEDAL OF FREEDOM IN 2007): 45/236, OR 19 PERCENT.

O. LUIS POSADA CARRILES: (CUBAN ANTI-CASTRO FIGURE PRESENTLY IN THE UNITED STATES. APPEARS ON BILLBOARDS IN CUBA AND FREQUENTLY IN THE GOC-CONTROLLED MEDIA. LABELED AS A TERRORIST AND ACCUSED OF BOMBING A CUBAN AIRLINER THAT RESULTED IN 73 DEATHS.): 149/236, OR 63 PERCENT, RECOGNIZED POSADA. NOTE: RESPONDENTS IDENTIFIED POSADA AS "TERRORIST," "FREEDOM FIGHTER, OR BY MANY OTHER TITLES. RECOGNITION OF HIS NAME WAS ACTUALLY HIGHER THAN 63 PERCENT, BUT CREDIT WAS NOT GIVEN TO A NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS WHO IDENTIFIED POSADA ONLY AS "CUBAN-AMERICAN" OR "CUBAN LIVING IN EXILE."

P. OSWALDO PAYA. (ALONG WITH MBR, CONSIDERED CUBA'S MOST

PROMINENT DISSIDENT. AUTHOR OF THE VARELA PROJECT, WHICH AT LEAST 25,000 CUBANS HAVE SIGNED, CALLING FOR POLITICAL REFORMS AND HUMAN RIGHTS): 68/236, OR 29 PERCENT, RECOGNIZED PAYA. NOTE: MANY REFUGEE APPLICANTS CLAIM TO HAVE SIGNED THE VARELA PROJECT, BUT NOT ALL ARE AWARE OF THE AUTHOR OF THE DOCUMENT.

Q. JOSE FUSTER: (ONE OF THE MORE FAMOUS CUBAN ARTISTS, WHO HAS PAINTED, SCULPTED, AND MADE CERAMIC TILES FOR 40 YEARS. HAS TRAVELED ALL OVER THE WORLD, HAS HIS OWN WEBSITE, REGULARLY HOLDS EXHIBITIONS IN CUBA, AND HAS DECORATED HIS ENTIRE NEIGHBORHOOD IN HAVANA WITH HIS TILE WORK. WIDELY KNOWN AMONG FOREIGNERS, WHO, UNLIKE CUBANS, CAN AFFORD HIS WORKS. ONLY 1/236, OR .4 PERCENT, OF THE RESPONDENTS RECOGNIZED FUSTER.

R. YOANI SANCHEZ: (CUBAN BLOGGER WHO PASSES FOR A FOREIGNER AND THEREFORE IS ABLE TO SLIP INTO HOTELS AND USE INTERNET COMPUTERS TO WRITE FACTUAL STORIES ABOUT LIFE IN CUBA. RECENTLY LABELED BY TIME MAGAZINE AS ONE OF THE 100 MOST INFLUENTIAL PERSONS IN THE WORLD and awarded the prestigious Ortega y Gasset prize by the Spanish newspaper El Pais): 4/236, OR 2 PERCENT.

S. RAMON LABANINO: (ONE OF FIVE CUBANS LABELED "HEROES" BY THE GOC, WHICH FREQUENTLY ACCUSES THE UNITED STATES AS HAVING CONVICTED AND JAILED THEM IN 1998 UNJUSTLY FOR SPYING. POSTERS AND SIGNS FOR THESE "FIVE HEROES" ARE EVERYWHERE IN HAVANA, AND THEIR NAMES AND FACES ARE DEPICTED IN MANY BILLBOARDS): 112/236, OR 47 PERCENT.

T. MICHAEL PARMLY: (THE FORMER CHIEF OF MISSION AT USINT): 26/236, OR 11 PERCENT.

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ANALYSIS:  
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3. (C) 113 OF THE 236 REFUGEE APPLICANTS POLLED (MORE THAN ONE HALF) COULD NOT RECOGNIZE ANY DISSIDENT/OPPOSITION FIGURE. OF THE SEVEN DISSIDENTS IN THE SURVEY, THE AVERAGE NUMBER OF DISSIDENTS CORRECTLY IDENTIFIED BY RESPONDENTS WAS 1.5, OR FEWER THAN ONE IN FOUR. EIGHTY FOUR PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS DID NOT RECOGNIZE DAMA DE BLANCO LAURA POLLAN, AND 81 PERCENT DID NOT RECOGNIZE OSCAR ELIAS BISCET. EVEN OSWALDO PAYA, ARGUABLY THE MOST IMPORTANT DISSIDENT IN CUBA, WAS NOT RECOGNIZED BY 71 PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS.

4. (C) IT APPEARS THAT THE CUBANS MOST DISCONTENTED WITH THE SYSTEM--THOSE WHO APPLY FOR REFUGEE STATUS--HAVE LITTLE AWARENESS OF OPPOSITION FIGURES. THAT STATEMENT SPEAKS VOLUMES ABOUT THE SUCCESS THE REGIME HAS HAD IN CONTROLLING THE INFORMATION RECEIVED BY CUBANS. IT MAY ALSO BE THAT MANY REFUGEE APPLICANTS HAVE CONCLUDED THAT CONSORTING WITH OPPOSITION FIGURES OR EVEN ACCEPTING LITERATURE THAT IS CONSIDERED "COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARY" IS NOT WORTH THE POTENTIAL PENALTY IF CAUGHT. MOST OF THESE INDIVIDUALS, THE GREAT

MAJORITY OF WHOM LIVE IN POVERTY, SPEND THE BULK OF THEIR TIME TRYING TO RESOLVE THEIR IMMEDIATE PROBLEMS OF FINDING ENOUGH FOOD, MEDICINE, AND OTHER BASIC NECESSITIES TO SURVIVE, AND HAVE LITTLE TIME OR INCLINATION TO INVOLVE THEMSELVES IN OPPOSITION ACTIVITIES. THEIR MOST URGENT PRIORITY IS NOT TO CHANGE THE SYSTEM, BUT RATHER TO ESCAPE CUBA.

5. (C) EVEN THOUGH MANY TRY TO TUNE OUT THE GOVERNMENT'S ENDLESS PROPAGANDA, SOME OF THE REGIME'S OFT-REPEATED MESSAGES HAVE BEEN ABSORBED BY ALL CUBANS, WHICH IS WHY THERE ARE COMPARATIVELY HIGH LEVELS OF NAME RECOGNITION FOR POSADA CARRILES AND RAMON LABANINO, AND WHY PROMINENT GOVERNMENT FIGURES SUCH AS CARLOS LAGE AND RICARDO ALARCON WERE RECOGNIZED BY THE MAJORITY OF REFUGEE APPLICANTS. STILL, IT WAS NOTEWORTHY THAT, WHILE MANY RECOGNIZED THE NAMES AND HAD A GENERAL IDEA OF WHO THE INDIVIDUALS WERE, THEY FREQUENTLY WERE CONFUSED ABOUT THE ACTUAL JOBS/ACTIVITIES ATTRIBUTABLE TO THEM.

6. (C) THE SURVEY DEMONSTRATES THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE CUBAN GOVERNMENT IN LIMITING ACCESS TO OPPOSITION VIEWS. YOANI SANCHEZ WAS RECENTLY NAMED BY TIME MAGAZINE AS ONE OF THE 100 MOST IMPORTANT PEOPLE IN THE WORLD. BUT SHE WRITES ON THE INTERNET, TO WHICH FEW CUBANS HAVE ACCESS. THE FACT THAT CUBAN MEDIA SHOWED ON MAY 20 PHOTOS OF MARTHA BEATRIZ ROQUE USING AN INTERNET COMPUTER AND REVEALING THAT HER PASSWORD WAS KNOWN, IS AN INDICATION TO ALL CUBANS WHO DID NOT ALREADY KNOW IT, THAT BIG BROTHER IS ALWAYS WATCHING WHAT CUBANS DO (ESPECIALLY ON THE INTERNET) AND READY TO POUNCE ON "COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARIES." YOANI SANCHEZ, ARTICLES ARE NOT READ BY ORDINARY CUBANS, AND THAT COULD EXPLAIN WHY THE GOVERNMENT ALLOWS HER TO KEEP PUBLISHING HER STORIES.

7. (C) THOUGH IT IS CLEAR THAT THE REGIME'S PERVASIVE MANAGEMENT OF INFORMATION ON THE ISLAND PREVENTS WIDE KNOWLEDGE OF DISSIDENTS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES, IT ALSO SEEMS CLEAR THAT CUBANS EITHER TUNE OUT COMPLETELY OR PAY ONLY MINIMAL ATTENTION TO THE MASSIVE PROPAGANDA EFFORTS THE REGIME SUBSTITUTES FOR NEWS. INDEED, FOR A COUNTRY PROUD OF ITS HIGH LITERACY RATE--THE RESULT OF A HALF CENTURY OF HIGHLY-TOUTED AND MUCH-ADMIREDLITERACY CAMPAIGNS, THE CUBAN PEOPLE WHO PARTICIPATED IN THIS INFORMAL SURVEY, AT LEAST, SEEM REMARKABLY UNINFORMED. THIS ARGUES FOR A CONTINUATION, AND EVEN EXPANSION, OF OUR ON-ISLAND EFFORTS TO BREAK THE GOC INFORMATION BLOCKADE.

WILLIAMS

=====CABLE ENDS=====